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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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What a week, weather-wise! It's 0-degrees outside, as I sit here in my relatively warm study putting this week's issue together. My wife's car was so cold this morning that she was unable to get it into gear and drive to work. Mine faired just a little bit better; it was sluggish but I could drive her in. It was well under zero degrees at that time. The sun is out and shining brightly, but I don't think that it's going to help too much to raise the temperature!

Things are still a little "chaotic" around here, but starting to get back to some degree of normalcy. It's a lot lonelier around here without Butkus' presence, but we're slowly adapting to those circumstances. We always knew that the day would arrive when he'd be gone, but I guess that there's really no way to prepare for that eventuality.

My usual "spare" time has significantly decreased over the past couple of months due to my being back to work, even on a part time basis. I don't have a regular schedule, so advanced-planning of what I want to do tends to vary from week to week. And working mostly nights has put a damper on when I can get things done (I prefer doing things later in the day, when I seem to be more creative). But, I'm starting to get back to some of the things that I enjoy - a variety of hobbies. During the winter months, especially here in New England, where one hasn't a clue how each day will be from one minute to the next, it pays to have some hobbies to fall back on inside a warm environment. So I've been spending the past few days getting back to my new stamp issues first day covers creations. These are mostly for my own collection, but I do make some to sell on a few auction sites to help subsidize my hobby. At present, I have 4-5 different covers in various degrees of completion to finish up and send out for servicing.

To get back on track with the subject of this magazine, I've noticed over the past few days that various Atari-related forums on Delphi have recently closed. Surprised? No, I can't say that I'm surprised because the activity on those particular sites has been almost non-existent over the past couple of years. But, it was a little sad to see them gone nonetheless. It's difficult to suggest that seeing these forums gone displays a few more examples of more nails in the Atari coffin - Atari is long gone and now only exists as a fond memory, maintained by dwindling numbers of folks like us who still use their old machines on occasion, or talk about them with fondness. It's been a fun ride!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. I don't know about you, but I'm freezing my butt off. It's cold out there. I mean, damn cold. When I got up this morning the temperature was two degrees. Yep. Two. Of course, there are other places (International Falls, for instance) where the temperature is lower, but that's one of the reasons I don't live there! [grin]

The other big news story by the time you read this will be the airplane that crashed in the Hudson river. All I can say is that the passengers are lucky that it was the Hudson and not the East river. [yuck]

The passengers are also lucky that the pilot of the plane, this Chesley Sullenberger, was at the stick and had the training, experience and circumstances that culminated in his being able to set down on the water without massive loss of life or at least multiple serious injuries. At this time, the most seriously injured passenger is reported to have received two broken legs. While that's not pleasant and will no doubt require a lot of time to heal and rehab, it's one hell of a lot better than it could have been. If I had been a passenger on that plane, the pilot and the entire crew would be on my Christmas card list for life!

If I was to be so bold (which I guess I am) as to offer advice to Captain Sullenberger, I'd say, "Dude, retire now, right this very minute. You ain't NEVER going to have a better moment than that one." But the truth is that we NEED people like 'Sully'. We need them to not only do what they do in such an exemplary fashion, but to teach others how to do it as well.

Oh, and I'll bet you a sawbuck (just about my entire life's savings at this point) that Chesley Sullenberger will be Barack Obama's 'Lenny Skutnik'. Remember Lenny? He's the guy who jumped into the freezing Potomac during a blizzard to help rescue someone from the freezing water after a jet crash and was mentioned in President Reagan's State of the Union speech. Look for "Cap'n Sully" to be mentioned by Obama shortly after swearing in. If ever we needed a hero, nows the time.

These guys, Skutnik and Sullenberger, along with a thousand more like them who never get the spotlight, are the true heroes. They are the best among us. They're regular folks like you and I, but when presented with the mind-numbing situations they had to deal with, they acted and, as that sports show used to say, snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.

Maybe we should get these guys to run the 'big three' auto manufacturers and the finance industry. We need guys who'll step up and do what needs to be done, not spend their time wondering how to maximize their bonuses and stock options.

Well, anyway, I promised myself that I wasn't going to let this get political. Let's just say that we need more people like Skutnik and Sullenberger and leave it at that...

Except for the fact that we ALL need to be like 'Lenny' and 'Sully'. Gandhi once said you need to BE the change you seek. I think the same is true here... if we want more heroes, we need to BE those heroes. We need to see that heroes aren't the movie characters or even necessarily just our soldiers (although they certainly ARE heroes), but normal every-day folk like you and I who choose to make a difference. You don't have to jump into freezing cold water to be a hero, either. Just make a little bit of a difference ever day. Just a little bit. All it takes is a smile or a kind word... things that don't cost you anything but a moment of your time. Give it a shot. What have you got to lose? These days, it's the safest investment you can make!

Okay, let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

'Phantomm' asks for help finding or designing a program:

"I'm looking for a program probably in Basic if possible, that when run will check the Atari for what type it is and then run a program for the Atari it finds.

For example....

Program runs and finds a 1040STe, then runs Program X which is specifically made for it.

Or Program runs and finds a Falcon 030 then runs Program Z which is specifically made for it.

And extras that the program will find and report such as amount of RAM, Video Display capability and etc. would be good too, so that Custom programs can be setup for machine capability. And if it would run in the Auto Folder or normal directory would be helpful.

Anyone up to knocking a program like this out?"

'MiKRO' tells Phantomm:

"I really doubt there's some GUI application for such task, however, it's pretty easy to code.

Just look after cookie jar (_MCH, _VDO, _CPU, ... variables) and Pexec () (for starting the external program). The Atari Compendium should give you all the needed info."

'Charlie' adds:

"If you can't remember the name, its called sys_info.prg.
[It] may not tell every thing you need to know but that's when you can try the programming from the atari compendium."

Phantomm tells Charlie:

"I had forgotten about Sys_info, using that info and the Atari Comp. I was able to set up just what the customer needed."

Last week, someone had come across a peculiar cartridge and had asked what it might be for. Someone mentioned that it might be a 'blitz' cable. Ben Smith now explains:

"The Blitz Cable doesn't look like a Cartridge, it's a Cable. Unlike the Synchro Express that does look like a Cartridge with a DB25 Connector for the Parallel Port. And a plug for the external Disk Drive Port and a Pass-Through Port for the External Disk Drive. When you use the Synchro Express it works best with matching disk drive Mechanisms. Look for the eject button to match Mechanisms.

The Synchro Express makes your Atari Disk Drives act less intelligent so disk drives are too stupid to fail copies due to copy protection. Synchro Express is my favorite ST Hardware Copier, 2nd is the Discovery Cartridge. Synchro and even the Blitz Cable are an easier way to backup copy protected software. It takes less intelligence to successfully copy. Also, when copying, both A & B Drives work simultaneously. I don't have Synchro Express to sell, I love mine!"

Ronald van der Kamp adds:

"There is a floppy connector. It is some kind of one-to-one floppy disk copier. Here I have a Replica-Box ST from 1987 TECHHart Handelsagentur ROM-Module + Software that has 2 connectors.

It copies every disk on a one-by-one basis by synchronizing both drives. I think this does the same with one external drive and the internal drive."

Phantomm adds:

"... My Blitz Cable doesn't look anything like that.

Anyone have the Disk Drive with the built in Blitz stuff?"

Our buddy Ronald Hall adds:

"Not me - but I do have the Blitz cable/software, and I agree - mine looks nothing like that cart the original poster showed."

Phantomm adds:

"The HART chip is normally associated with a HAPPY Disk Copier.

I have the Discovery Cartridge, the Large one. If I remember correctly, they also made a smaller one for the ST that also connected to the cartridge port, but I didn't think it had a cable. ICBW, because I only saw a pic of it. However the case was similar but different.

This Case looks exactly like a Migraph Hand Scanner cartridge interface, except for the cable. On the Migraph case, there is a small port where you connect the hand scanner cable, in about the same location where the

cable on this one is.

However, I've not taken my scanner interface apart, to look inside. The GoldenImage Scanner Interface is just like the MiGraph one except the cover goes over all the PCB, only the cart connection can be seen.

My guess is that it's a Disk Copier of some sort. Or some type of Disk Drive Interface. I don't know of any other ST devices that uses a ST disk drive connection."

Dave, the poster of the original question, replies:

"Thanks everybody for the information.

Based in what you told me, I searched for some information about Atari cartridges for copy purposes.

And indeed I have found that the connector on my unknown cartridge is the typical connector to be connected to an Atari floppy drive.

Also I have found that one of those cartridges for making copies, called Discovery Cartridge (made by Happy Computers, Inc in 1987) have a HARTD1 chip in it."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - PlayStation 2 Still Playing Games!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Killzone 2 Kicking Tires, But Why?
  No New Xbox Coming!
  And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

PlayStation 2 Still Playing Games - and 50 Million Strong

The Sony PlayStation 2 debuted in 2000, before the beginning of the Bush administration, when Google Inc. was still a private search startup and the iPod and Windows XP hadn't been born. Yet despite its age in a

business obsessed with the new, the video game console remains a big seller today.

In fact, Sony Corp. announced Tuesday that it has sold 50 million PlayStation 2 units in North America.

Microsoft Corp., meanwhile, has already discontinued the original Xbox, which launched a year after Sony's PS2. According to the most recently available figures from the NPD Group, which tracks U.S. sales only, Redmond, Wash.-based Microsoft sold 14.5 million of those Xbox consoles. Nintendo Co.'s GameCube, another PS2 competitor, sold 12 million units in the country. NPD puts U.S.-only sales of the PS2 through November at 43 million.

In November, Americans bought 206,000 units of the PlayStation 2, which now costs $130, down from its original $300 price tag. The people buying it are no longer the early adopters and hardcore gamers, but rather, lower-income consumers and families who want to get into - or back into - gaming, said John Koller, director of hardware marketing at Sony Computer Entertainment America.

The PlayStation 2's successor, the $400 PlayStation 3, sold 378,000 units in November. Launched in 2006, it has lagged its rivals, Microsoft's Xbox 360 and the Nintendo Wii, when it comes to unit sales. Its price likely has a lot to do with this. While the console includes a Blu-ray player and other extra features, it's more expensive than the $250 Wii and the cheapest Xbox 360, which goes for $200.

Daniel DeMatteo, the chief executive of video game retailer GameStop Corp., recently called the PS3 a "great machine," but said it is a bit pricey for a recession.

When the PlayStation 2 debuted, its early popularity was enhanced by its inclusion of a DVD player, which was innovative in 2000. These days, beyond its price, the PS2 is still attractive because Sony nurtures it. Now-iconic titles like "Grand Theft Auto III" and the original "Guitar Hero" made their name on the PlayStation 2, and Sony continues to churn out new games for the console.

"We don't intend on discarding the system any time soon," Koller said, without going into more specifics.

No New Xbox Because "Faster" and "Prettier" Doesn't Cut It

Don't look for Microsoft's Xbox "Next" anytime soon, says company President Robbie Bach. According to Bloomberg, Bach says Microsoft's planning to stick by the Xbox 360 longer than the original Xbox because "it's getting harder to persuade consumers to upgrade."

What's more, Bach says the current console lineup's outputting groovy enough visuals that it'd take some serious arm-twisting to convince us to upgrade in the near term.

"Just coming up with something that's faster and prettier isn't going to be sufficient," said Bach. "The life cycle for this generation of consoles - and I'm not just talking about Xbox, I'd include Wii and PS3 as well - is probably going to be a little longer than previous

generations."

Could it be? An honest-to-goodness executive making sense?

Killzone 2 Kicking Tires, Lighting Fires, but Why Again Exactly?

Guerilla Games' first-person PS3-exclusive shooter Killzone 2 has everyone gabbing, and bloggers in particular panting, gushing, and fawning. According to the developers, it's steeped in "Hollywood realism" that's supposed to make things more "immersive."

Pedestrian yawn-ese like "best looking console game ever" and "surpasses Crysis" should suffice to warn you that substance and/or insight aren't high priorities in much of the press coverage.

Besides, everything looks pretty gosh-darned amazing these days. Who cares if one game looks better than another.

What I want to know is /what's it play like?/ After all, we /play/ games, not "wall textures," "sweat glands," and "destructible milieus."

The first Killzone for the PS2 was similarly hyped before release and emerged a toweringly mediocre shooter anyway, only matched in mediocrity by its toweringly one-dimensional reviews.

The essence of insight then? "To Halo-killer, or not to Halo-killer."

Initial reactions to Killzone 2's gaming principles vis-a-vis CES don't reveal much.

You have to shoot bad guys. Turrets help. A building catches fire and crumbles. You employ a rocket launcher to blow open a door.

Hey, the game could be outstanding. But wait for it. Try the upcoming demo for yourself
.
Don't swoon over rhapsodies in ballyhoo.

And when the game itself arrives in late February, you know what to do with reviews that pony up Halo and Crysis for vacuous visual comparisons.

To the flames.

Video Game Censorship in New York City?

Video game censorship's making New York news again.

The always-vigilant folks at GamePolitics have the scoop on another legislative attempt to prohibit "the sale to minors of certain rated video games containing a rating that reflects content of various degrees of profanity, racist stereotypes or derogatory language, and/or actions toward a specific group of persons."

The act would 'amend the general business law' and prevent minors under the age of 18 from purchasing games that have a mature or violent rating. The latter language is both ambiguous and disturbing, as it's possible to have violent sub-ratings right down to the ESRB's baseline Everyone sticker, which can include supplemental tags like fantasy or mild violence.

If the bill passes, could legal hawks conjure suits on behalf of parties offended by the illegal sale of an Everyone-rated, mild-violence-tagged game to someone under 18?

The bill raises a couple familiar questions:

1. Do you believe minors need to be protected from potentially offensive (but otherwise legal) material?

2. Are you okay with the government legislating what is or isn't potentially offensive? Should age-based censorship of material that's legally acceptable for adults to purchase be executed by the government? Or parents?

3. Is there actionable consensus science showing how certain kinds of offensive (but legal) material causes specific or general developmental harm to minors?

4. Regardless, are bills like this even necessary? Last May, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission found that only 20 percent of 13 to 16 year olds were able to purchase M-rated video games from eight retailers. More importantly, the number was down 42 percent in 2006, and 85 percent since 2000, when these particular surveys started.

In May 2007, a Peter D. Hart Research Associates study reported that nearly 90% of American parents with kids who play games are aware of the ESRB's ratings, and use them.

The facts are compelling: Retail sales to minors have dropped /without/ government intervention, and the overwhelming majority of parents are both aware of the ESRB's ratings and using them.

Case of a solution in search of a problem by a politician in search of job security?

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Autodesk Exec Carol Bartz Named Yahoo! CEO

Carol Bartz, a Silicon Valley veteran and former head of software firm Autodesk, was named chief executive of Yahoo! on Tuesday, ending a two-month search for a new leader of the Internet company.

Bartz, 60, replaces Yahoo! founder Jerry Yang, who stepped down as CEO on November 18 after a rocky tenure at the helm of the Sunnyvale, California, firm that lasted a little over a year.

"We are very excited to have Carol Bartz leading Yahoo! into its next era of growth," Roy Bostock, chairman of Yahoo!’s board, said in a statement.

"She is the exact combination of seasoned technology executive and savvy leader that the Board was looking for."

Yahoo! also announced that president Sue Decker had decided to resign and would leave the company after a transitional period. Decker had been seen as a potential candidate for the CEO post.

Bartz, in a statement, acknowledged Yahoo!’s recent difficulties.

"There is no denying that Yahoo! has faced enormous challenges over the last year," she said.

"But I believe there is now an extraordinary opportunity to create value for our shareholders and new possibilities for our customers, partners and employees. We will seize that opportunity."

Yang, who founded Yahoo! in 1994 with a Stanford University classmate, intends to remain at Yahoo! and the board said his "iconic stature in the industry make him an invaluable resource for the future.

"We are delighted that he plans to stay actively involved and are deeply grateful for his many contributions to the company’s development," the board said.

Yang, who earned the ire of many Yahoo! share-holders last year for rejecting a 47-billion-dollar takeover offer from Microsoft, welcomed the choice of Bartz and said he would "assist her in any way she finds helpful."

Bartz served as president, chairman and CEO of Autodesk from 1992 to April 2006 and has remained executive chairman of the board of the company, which is based in San Rafael, California, and has some 7,000 employees.

She formerly worked at Sun Microsystems Inc., Digital Equipment Corp., and 3M Corp. and sits on the boards of Cisco Systems Inc., Intel Corp. and NetApp.

Analyst Rob Enderle of Enderle Group in Silicon Valley said Bartz would have her work cut out for her at Yahoo!.

"If she is successful here, she will be a legend," he said.

"Any qualified turn-around manager asked to work at Yahoo would probably run screaming the other way, because you don’t just have to turn this company around you have to figure out which direction," Enderle said.

"In a difficulty range of 1 to 10, this is an 11," he said. "Yahoo is kind of a science experiment so it has to be approached methodically by someone even-tempered and pragmatic, and those are skills she has."

Yahoo! has been losing ground on the Internet to companies such as

Google, MySpace and Facebook and the economic slowdown has hurt the firm particularly hard as advertisers cut back on spending.

Yang’s rejection of Microsoft’s 33-dollar-a-share takeover bid was met with disapproval by many share-holders including billionaire investor Carl Icahn, who led a revolt against Yang and was eventually named to Yahoo!’s board.

Microsoft chief executive Steve Ballmer has said the software giant remains interested in acquiring Yahoo!’s search business and analysts said Bartz’s appointment could revive talks between the companies.

Adding to Yahoo!’s woes last year was the rejection by US Justice Department anti-trust regulators of a proposed advertising partnership with Internet search king Google.

The deal had been expected to earn Yahoo! hundreds of millions of dollars in the first year alone.

Microsoft Lifts Download Limit for Windows 7 beta

Acknowledging that its release of Windows 7 public beta "was not ideal," Microsoft said it will suspend the software’s 2.5 million download limit for a couple of weeks.

Microsoft’s Brandon LeBlanc announced the move in a company blog Saturday:

Due to an enormous surge in demand, the download experience was not ideal so we listened and took the necessary steps to ensure a good experience. We have clearly heard that many of you want to check out the Windows 7 Beta and, as a result, we have decided remove the initial 2.5 million limit on the public beta for the next two weeks (thru January 24th). During that time you will have access to the beta even if the download number exceeds the 2.5 million unit limit.

The software was supposed to be made available on Friday, but the company delayed the release after a day filled with Web site problems.

The company has said it is aiming for several million testers of the beta version, the availability of which was announced Wednesday night by Steve Ballmer in his keynote speech at the Consumer Electronics Show. Microsoft has been aiming to have the final version ready to be on PCs for this year’s holiday shopping season, but Windows boss Bill Veghte said it is still too soon to say whether the company will make that time frame. Officially, Microsoft has promised that it will be out before the third anniversary of Vista’s January 2007 mainstream launch.

Popularity of Tiny ‘Netbooks’ Set To Rise in 2009

Last year so-called "netbooks" crept into stores - computers that often cost less than $400, with small screens and keyboards that made them look Lilliputian next to laptops that seemed perfectly portable just months earlier.

These little computers introduced consumers to the idea that extreme portability could be combined with a low price, as long as people were willing to use the computer for getting on the Internet and not much more. Netbooks won't include a DVD drive, the fastest microprocessor or enough storage space to house endless amounts of photos and videos.

This year, because of the dismal economy and laptop buyers' increasing comfort with these miniature computers, more netbooks are headed to store shelves. Some netbooks will keep their lower-than-a-cheap-PC price, but others will cost what bigger laptops do, and include features like touch screens and metal casings as companies look to keep the category's momentum going.

At the International Consumer Electronics Show last week, Taiwan-based AsusTek Computer Inc. - which launched its $269-to-$699 Eee PC netbooks in 2007 - introduced a new one called the Eee PC Touch. It sports a nearly 9-inch touch screen that swivels or folds over so it can be used as a tablet-style PC. Asus expects the Touch to be available in March for $499 and plans to release a version with a 10-inch screen.

That size and price aren't far from a regular laptop. A Dell Inspiron 1525 with a 15-inch screen and more powerful processor starts at $479 through the Round Rock, Texas-based company's Web site.

Jackie Hsu, Asus' president of the Americas, said his company sold 5 million Eee PCs worldwide in 2008. He expects the market to grow this year because there are more product choices.

Indeed, larger computer makers like Dell Inc., MSI Computer, Lenovo Group Ltd., Acer Inc. and Hewlett-Packard Co. are betting on netbooks as well. Several of them introduced upcoming models at CES.

Palo Alto, Calif.-based HP, the world's No. 1 computer maker, showed an addition to its Mini netbook line, the Mini 2140, which is expected to be available in January for $499. Unlike the company's $329 Mini 1000, the 2140 includes features like an aluminum case, keyboards coated to resist wear and an accelerometer that can tell when the device is dropped and will instruct the hard drive to shut down.

Dell, the second-largest computer maker, unveiled a new netbook as well. And it is hoping to drive sales of an earlier model by temporarily cutting its price to $99. That includes a $350 rebate when buyers agree to pay for a two-year AT&T Inc. data plan that gives the computer Internet access over the air.

Retailers have high hopes for netbooks in 2009, too, if Amazon.com Inc. is any indication. Between Black Friday and Christmas, eight of the top 10 best selling laptops on the site were netbooks, said Amazon's vice president of consumer electronics, Paul Ryder.

"I think the category will continue to do better than the standard laptop category. It's still new so I think it's going to grow faster," he said.

This could present a problem for computer makers, though.

Several of them hoped netbooks would not be a replacement for an out-of-date laptop, but a companion device that people take with them while on the go. For now, though, NPD Group analyst Stephen Baker thinks

the bad economy will help netbook sales and cut into sales of larger laptops. People who would have ordinarily spent $600 on a laptop might trade down and spend less to buy a netbook instead.

"The end result is that I think these are more likely to be cannibalistic, at least in the early parts of 2009," he said.

But in the long run, some analysts - Baker included - are skeptical about the netbook category's life span. Baker believes netbooks could fade out next year, and be replaced by even smaller devices that are also focused on getting their owners on the Internet.

Gartner Inc. analyst Ken Dulaney said the category is "slowly evaporating" and points out that while the bad economy might make netbooks more appealing in the short term, they are unlikely to win over a broad swath of consumers who require bigger keyboards and more powerful performance found in bigger laptops, known as notebooks.

"If your usage pattern really demands a notebook, you will be disappointed," he said.

Browser Wars Deemed Hot Again

The browser wars are back. Dignitaries from major browser makers - including Microsoft, Mozilla, Opera, and newcomer Google - served on a panel Thursday evening that discussed the apparent re-emergence of competition in the browser space after several years of dormancy.

(Apple, which offers the Safari browser, declined an invitation to participate, said Steve Wildstrom, moderator for the Churchill Club event in Palo Alto, Calif., and a columnist at BusinessWeek.)

While it appeared Microsoft's Internet Explorer had won the browser battle five years ago, things have changed with the advent of mobile browsers, Firefox and Safari, Wildstrom said. Panelists tackled questions such as balancing the need to innovate with the need to be compatible, as well as pondering security issues.

"I think we're nowhere close to done in terms of innovation in the browser," said Dean Hachamovitch, general manager for Internet Explorer at Microsoft. But challenges include handling innovation, interoperability, and security, he said.

"There's a broad set of things that people expect to just work," Hachamovitch said. Microsoft also has had to face the reality that it must ship a browser even while standards are still under construction.

"We're pretty sensitive to the needs of application developers," said Mozilla Vice President of Engineering Mike Shaver, citing enhancements for Firefox such as TraceMonkey, to boost JavaScript performance.

Google recently entered the browser fray with Chrome. "One thing that we ??? were very specific about [with Chrome was]?? that while we wanted to add more choice for users, we [did not want to] add another platform for developers," said Sundar Pichai, vice president of product management at Google. Chrome features the WebKit open source browser engine also used in Safari, so Web site builders do not have to worry about accommodating

another unfamiliar engine, he said.

Google’s entry into the browser space arose from its building of applications and becoming concerned about the state of the browser platform, Pichai said.

Each of the panelists cited what they believed to be the uniqueness of their browser.

"Our claim to fame is that we’re able to make a Web browser to run on anything," said Christen Krogh, chief development officer for Opera.

Chrome, Pichai said, offers a simple UI and speed. Internet Explorer, Hachamovitch said, at its core is focused on how real people use the Web.

"We try to deliver the right experience for a really broad spectrum of customers," such as consumers and developers, Hachamovitch said.

Mozilla’s Firefox is a powerful tool for making sure the Web continues to be open, Shaver said. The Mozilla organization, meanwhile, is chartered not to make money and also serves as a differentiator. "We’re chartered to protect the Internet and how people connect to it," Shaver said.

Hachamovitch said a test suite is being developed for Cascading Style Sheets 2.1. CSS provides for formatting of Web pages. "A test suite is a crucial thing," he said.

In the security space, the upcoming Internet Explorer 8 browser offers a facility to protect from cross-site scripting attacks. "People’s expectations for the browser are just going up and up and up," Hachamovitch said.

Pichai noted the impending release of Chrome for the Macintosh. "We’re definitely working very hard on a Mac version," he said.

Apple CEO Jobs Backtracks on Health, Takes Leave

Apple Inc. co-founder and Chief Executive Steve Jobs said Wednesday he is taking a medical leave of absence until the end of June - just a week after the cancer survivor tried to assure investors and employees his recent weight loss was simply caused by a treatable hormone deficiency.

Jobs, 53, said in a letter last week that he would remain at Apple’s helm despite the hormone deficiency, and said he had already begun the "relatively simple and straightforward" treatment for the problem. But in an e-mail to employees Wednesday, Jobs backtracked.

"During the past week I have learned that my health-related issues are more complex than I originally thought," he wrote.

Apple’s chief operating officer, Tim Cook, will take over Jobs’ responsibilities while he is on leave.

After-hours trading on Apple shares was halted. The Cupertino, Calif.-based company’s stock had sank $2.38, or 2.7 percent, to close at $85.33.

Jobs announced in 2004 that he had undergone successful surgery to treat a very rare form of pancreatic cancer - an islet cell neuroendocrine tumor. The cancer is easily cured if diagnosed early. Jobs did not have a deadlier and more common form of pancreatic cancer called adenocarcinoma.

An Internet Era Ends As Technology Icons Exit

Steve Jobs exiting the Apple stage, perhaps not to return, signals a close to an Internet Age era with roots stretching back to the radical hippie movement of the 1960s.

His departure for health reasons comes some seven months after his renowned rival Bill Gates retired from Microsoft to devote himself to philanthropic work.

The two culture-changing men were seen as leaders of rival camps: personal computer lovers versus the cult of Macintosh computers.

Technology allegiances were the stuff of fierce debates in coffee houses and other Silicon Valley social settings, with vitriol spewed by all sides.

Macintosh devotees were passionate underdogs standing up to PC faithful whose confidence was cemented by the fact more than 90 percent of the computers in the world are PCs running on Microsoft operating systems.

The dueling technologies had faces at which people aimed praise of scorn. Gates was the PC. Jobs is the Macintosh.

Jerry Yang, the very public face of Internet pioneer Yahoo!, was replaced as chief executive this week by Carol Bartz and it seems he has already faded into the purple and gold woodwork at the firm’s California headquarters.

"In many ways we are stepping out of the age where the people are defining the company," said analyst Rob Enderle of Enderle Group in Silicon Valley.

"We talk about the Google kids, but are the founders truly icons. I argue not. We seem to be moving away from the age where there is a face behind the company; a larger than life human component."

Ironically, while Google and other modern Internet superstars use private data about their millions of users to target ads, their founders tend to vigilantly protect their privacy.

"In many ways, Internet companies are losing their personalities," Enderle said. "Ever changing brands in a constant sea of surging names."

Jobs and Gates, both born in 1955, grew up during the socially rebellious 1960s and bear its mark, according to Peter Friess, a historian who is president of The Tech Museum of Innovation in the heart of Silicon Valley.

Gates and Jobs both dropped out of college to pursue dreams of building

computers for people.

Before Jobs and his friend Steve Wozniak made the first Apple computer, they crafted a "blue box" to get around paying for long distance telephone calls.

"They came out of a time when culture meant a lot to all of us," Friess said.

"It was a revolutionary time. It is always a time that creates people. Now, Google, Facebook and others align much more with the system. Social networks don’t change the world like Jobs and Gates did."

Bringing personal computers to the masses fulfilled a hippie mantra of "Power to the people," according to Friess.

While the first PCs and "Macs" were sold by Gates and Jobs before there was a Web to surf, the men led their respective companies to glory in the Internet Age.

"In time, I suppose we might look back at the leaders of big search companies in a similar way, but it really feels like a thin comparison," said University of California, Berkeley, information school assistant professor Coye Cheshire.

"If only because all these fantastic information services only became practical and truly useful once we had the PCs, Macs, iPods, Xboxes, Zunes, iPhones, etc in our lives."

Crises with climate change and wars fought for control of oil have set the stage for new iconic visionaries in the molds of Gates or Jobs to rise in the area of renewable energy, says Friess.

"Putting personal computers in the hands was really giving power to the people," Friess said.

"I’m waiting for someone in the renewable energy world with the same vision Jobs had in the computer world."

In a rare joint appearance, Jobs and Gates reminisced on stage at an All Things Digital conference in California two years ago. The men joked that their rivalry was misunderstood.

"We’ve kept our marriage secret for over a decade now," Jobs quipped, eliciting raucous laughter from the audience.

While Jobs and Gates "personified the dispute" between Apple and Microsoft, the two companies are unlikely to change their ways without their iconic founders, according to analyst Michael Cherry of Directions On Microsoft.

"No one wants to die ... and yet death is the destination we all share," Jobs told a stadium packed with students during a 2005 commencement speech at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California.

"Death is possibly the single best invention in life. It clears out the old to make way for the new."

Google Conquers 2008 Search Market in U.S.

About 69.5 percent of Internet searches in the U.S. took place through Google during 2008, with search traffic increasing 8 percent over 2007, according to research firm Hitwise.

At whose expense was this growth? No surprise: Yahoo and Microsoft. Second-place Yahoo had 19.2 percent of the search volume, a drop of 11 percent from its year-earlier volume, while Microsoft accounted for 5.9 percent of the volume, a drop of 32 percent for the year, Hitwise said. Ask.com increased volume 1 percent to a share of 3.8 percent.

But looking at the story month-to-month, Microsoft fared better. "MSN Search has increased five months in a row now," Hitwise said, rising to 5.6 percent of the market in December.

Hitwise wasn't the only analysis firm to release market share numbers. On Wednesday, Nielsen Online issued its own, with broad agreement.

According to Nielsen, Google had 62.9 percent share in December, compared with 16.8 percent for Yahoo, 9.8 percent for Microsoft, 4.1 for AOL (which actually uses Google's results), and 2.0 for Ask.com.

Nielsen said the total number of searches in December was 8.6 billion in the U.S., up 19.6 percent from the year earlier.

Buying on Web To Avoid Sales Taxes Could End Soon

Shopping online can be a way to find bargains while steering clear of crowds - and sales taxes.

But those tax breaks are starting to erode. With the recession pummeling states' budgets, their governments increasingly want to fill the gaps by collecting taxes on Internet sales, which are growing even as the economy shudders.

And that is sparking conflict with companies that do business online only and have enjoyed being able to offer sales-tax free shopping.

One of the most aggressive states, New York, is being sued by Amazon.com-Inc. over a new requirement that online companies must collect taxes on shipments to New York residents, even if the companies are located elsewhere. New York's governor also wants to tax "Taxman" covers and other songs downloaded from Internet services like iTunes.

The amount of money at stake nationwide is unclear; online sales were expected to make up about 8 percent of all retail sales in 2008 and total $204 billion, according to Forrester Research. This is up from $175 billion in 2007.

Based on that 2008 figure, Forrester analyst Sucharita Mulpuru says her rough estimate is that if Web retailers had to collect taxes on all sales to consumers, it could generate $3 billion in new revenue for governments.

It's uncertain how much more could come as well from unpaid sales taxes

on Internet transactions between businesses. But even with both kinds of taxes available, state budgets would need more help. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that the states' budget gaps in the current fiscal year will total $89 billion.

Collecting online sales taxes is not as simple as it might sound. A nationwide Internet business faces thousands of tax-collecting jurisdictions states, counties and cities and tangled rules about how various products are taxed.

And a 1992 U.S. Supreme Court ruling said that states can't force businesses to collect sales taxes unless the businesses have operations in that state. The court also said Congress could lift the ban, which remains in place for now.

As a result, generally only businesses with a "physical presence" in a state such as a store or office building collect sales tax on products sent to buyers in the same state. For instance, a Californian buying something from Barnes & Noble Inc.'s Web site pays sales tax because the bookseller has stores in the Golden State. Buying the same thing directly from Amazon would not ring up sales tax.

That doesn't mean products purchased online from out-of-state companies are necessarily tax-free. Consumers are usually supposed to self-report taxes on these items. This is called a use tax, but not surprisingly, it tends to go unreported.

In hopes of unraveling the complex tax rules and bringing states more money 22 states and many brick-and-mortar retailers support the efforts of a group called the Streamlined Sales Tax Governing Board. The group is getting states to simplify and make uniform their numerous tax rates and rules, in exchange for a crack at taxing online sales.

Among other things, participating states need to change how they define things such as "food" and "clothing." For example, one state might now consider a T-shirt clothing and tax it as such, while another might consider it a sporting good and tax it differently.

In response, more than 1,100 retailers have registered with the streamlining group and are collecting sales taxes on items shipped to states that are part of the agreement even if they are not legally obligated to.

The streamlining board also is lobbying Congress to let the participating states do what the Supreme Court ruling banned: They could force businesses to collect taxes on sales made to in-state customers, even if the businesses don't have a physical presence there.

New Jersey, Michigan and North Carolina are among the largest of the 19 states that have adjusted their tax laws to fully comply with the group's streamlined setup. Washington was the only state to join in 2008, but three more states are close to becoming full members of the group. And Scott Peterson, the group's executive director, expects another seven states including Texas, Florida and Illinois to introduce legislation in January that would make them eligible to join.

Undoing the patchwork can be difficult, even if the weak economy increases states' motivation to go after online sales taxes. Similar bills have been introduced in several states and failed, sometimes because of the cost of changing tax laws. New York, for example, decided

against joining the streamlining board because it would require extensive revisions to its tax rules.

Besides various states and retailers such as Wal-Mart Stores Inc., Borders Group Inc. and J.C. Penney Co., the National Retail Federation, the industry's biggest trade group, also supports the Streamlined Sales Tax group.

Companies that handle Web sales only have organized as well. NetChoice, whose members include eBay Inc. and online discount retailer Overstock.com Inc., supports the states' tax simplification efforts, but its executive director, Steve DelBianco, says online retailers should have to collect taxes only in states where they have a physical presence.

But what if the meaning of "physical presence" is changed? New York essentially did that in April when its budget included a provision requiring online retailers like Amazon to collect taxes on purchases made by New Yorkers.

The new rule requires retailers to collect sales tax if they solicit business in New York by paying anyone within the state for leading customers to them. Since some Web site operators within New York are compensated for posting ads that link to sites like Amazon, the online retailers would have to collect taxes.

Matt Anderson, spokesman for the New York State Division of the Budget, said the state expects to reap $23 million during the current fiscal year, which ends March 31, from newly collected online sales taxes.

That's a sliver of the overall state budget for the same period, which is $119.7 billion. The state faces a revenue gap of $1.7 billion.

Yet Anderson said the state wants "to level the playing field and end the "unfair competitive advantage" Web-only companies have over brick-and-mortar stores that can't avoid collecting sales taxes.

Amazon complies, and collects sales taxes on shipments to New York. However, Amazon is still fighting the rule. It sued New York in April, alleging its provision is unconstitutional. Amazon also said it is being specifically targeted by the law. The case is pending.

Amazon declined further comment.

Salt Lake City-based Overstock is also suing New York over the law. Unlike Amazon, Overstock is not collecting sales tax in New York, because it ended agreements with about 3,400 affiliates in the state that were being paid for directing traffic to Overstock.com.

The Streamlined Sales Tax group hopes Congress takes up its uniform-tax idea in 2009. Peterson thinks the dismal economy boosts the chances of passage.

But Congress also will be occupied with economic stimulus plans involving bigger pools of money. And Mulpuru, the Forrester Research analyst, notes that for years there has been talk of taxing online retailers.

"It's a legal morass," she said. "In a best-case scenario, it's going to take a while to sort everything out."

Amazon Loses to NY in Suit Over Online Tax Haul

New York state won a round in court against Amazon.com over a new law requiring out-of-state online companies to collect sales tax from shoppers in New York.

The law applies to companies that don’t have offices in New York, but have at least one person in the state who works as an online agent - someone who links to a Web site and receives commissions for related sales.

A state Supreme Court justice in Manhattan ruled the suit should be dismissed, saying Amazon had no basis for legal action.

Patty Smith, an Amazon spokeswoman, declined comment. The company sued last year, challenging the constitutionality of the legislation. It could still appeal.

The suit argued the change unfairly targets Amazon, is overly broad and vague, and violates the commerce clause of the constitution because it imposes tax-collection obligations on out-of-state entities.

New York state argued that the law closes a "tax loophole."

Businesses with a physical presence in New York already collect the state sales tax on online purchases. The proposed law would apply to companies that have $10,000 or more in New York sales.

Officials estimated the state would gain nearly $50 million in the next two years from the tax. New Yorkers, like residents of many states, are currently on an honor system to report their online spending when they file state tax returns.

Booksellers in New York have long protested the lack of a sales tax on companies like Amazon.

"The state of New York was subsidizing sales on Amazon to the degree of 8 percent," said Oren Teicher, chief operating officer of the American Booksellers Association. "That was unfair. The government ought not ever be in the business of picking favorites among competing businesses."

Google Developer Site Being Used To Distribute Malware

Google’s free code-hosting Web site for developers is being used to distribute malware, a security researcher said on Friday.

Google Code is a place where programmers can host projects and code. Along with the legitimate code are links to fake videos that direct users to download a missing codec, said Dave Marcus, director of security research for McAfee Avert Labs. The codecs turn out instead to be password-stealing Trojan horses and programs geared toward stealing financial information for identity fraud, he said.

"They’re using it as a way to send out links or as a place to house

their links and redirects because it’s Google and obviously it gets highly ranked in the index," he said. "The bad guys look for services like this as a way to push out code."

A Google spokesman said the company has removed malware-distributing projects from Google Code and search results.

"Google works hard to protect our users from malware. Using Project Hosting on Google Code, or any Google product, to serve or host malware is a violation of our product policies," the spokesman said in a statement. "Using automated tools, we actively work to detect and remove sites that serve malware from our network. We have removed many of these projects from Google Code and from our search results. Additionally, we’ll continue to explore new ways to identify and eliminate such content."

The problem is similar to one that was found to be plaguing Microsoft’s MSN Spaces site a year ago and continues to occur there, according to a McAfee Avert Labs blog posting.

Hacker Leaves Message for Microsoft in Trojan Code

Here’s a new way to get Microsoft to pay attention to you: Slip a brief message into the malicious Trojan horse program you just wrote.

That’s what an unnamed Russian hacker did recently with a variation of Win32/Zlob, a Trojan program victims are being tricked into installing on their computers.

The message is surprisingly cordial, given that Microsoft’s security researchers spend their days trying to put people like Zlob’s author out of business. "Just want to say ’Hello’ from Russia. You are really good guys. It was a surprise for me that Microsoft can respond on threats so fast," the hacker wrote, adding, "Happy New Year, guys, and good luck!"

Zlob is one of the most common types of Trojan programs used to attack Windows these days. In a typical Zlob scam, the victim is sent a link to what looks like an interesting video. When the link is clicked, the user is told to install a multimedia codec file in order to watch the video. That file is actually malicious software.

It’s not clear whether the author of this message is the creator of Zlob, according to Joe Stewart, a researcher with SecureWorks. That’s because "Zlob is one of those things that gets mislabeled by AV companies a lot," he said via e-mail. "Basically any time they see malware being spread by ’you need this video codec...’ messages in multimedia files, it gets the Zlob label."

This isn’t the first time this particular hacker has sent a note to Microsoft’s security group. Last October he wrote a slightly creepy message, saying, "I want to see your eyes the man from Windows Defender’s team."

Unlike the October message, this latest note wasn’t caught by Microsoft. It was found Friday by a French security researcher using the hacker handle S!Ri.

According to this latest message, it may be the Zlob hacker’s last note

to Microsoft. "We are closing soon," he wrote. "So, you will not see some of my great ;) ideas in that family of software."

"It warms my heart that they're 'closing soon,'" wrote Microsoft spokesman Tareq Saade in a blog post Friday.

All things considered, hiding messages in source code may not be the most effective way of reaching the Windows Defender team. "Considering the enormous amount of malware we go through every day, it can be difficult to track follow up samples like this," Saade wrote.

The hacker also claimed that Microsoft had once offered him a job to help improve Windows Vista's security. Microsoft hired a large number of outside security consultants to test Vista's code before it was released in late 2006. "It's not interesting for me," the hacker concluded. "Just a life's irony."

Browser Bug Could Allow Phishing Without E-mail

A bug found in all major browsers could make it easier for criminals to steal online banking credentials using a new type of attack called "in-session phishing," according to researchers at security vendor Trusteer.

In-session phishing (pdf) gives the bad guys a solution to the biggest problem facing phishers these days: how to reach new victims. In a traditional phishing attack, the scammers send out millions of phoney e-mail messages disguised to look like they come from legitimate companies, such as banks or online payment companies.

Those messages are often blocked by spam-filtering software, but with in-session phishing, the e-mail message is taken out of the equation, replaced by a pop-up browser window.

Here's how an attack would work: The bad guys would hack a legitimate Web site and plant HTML code that looks like a pop-up security alert window. The pop-up would then ask the victim to enter password and login information, and possibly answer other security questions used by the banks to verify the identity of their customers.

For attackers, the hard part would be convincing victims that this pop-up notice is legitimate. But thanks to a bug found in the JavaScript engines of all the most widely-used browsers, there is a way to make this type of attack seem more believable, said Amit Klein, Trusteer's chief technology officer.

By studying the way browsers use JavaScript, Klein said he has found a way to identify whether or not someone is logged into a Web site, provided they use a certain JavaScript function. Klein wouldn't name the function because it would give criminals a way to launch the attack, but he has notified browser makers and expects the bug will eventually get patched.

Until then, criminals who discover the flaw could write code that checks whether Web surfers are logged into, for example, a predetermined list of 100 banking sites. "Instead of just popping up this random phishing message, an attacker can get more sophisticated by probing and finding

out whether the user is currently logged into one of 100 financial institution Web sites," he said.

"The fact that you're currently in-session lends a lot of credibility to the phishing message," he added.

Security researchers have developed other ways to determine whether a victim is logged into a certain site, but they are not always reliable. Klein said his technique doesn't always work but it can be used on many sites including banks, on-line retailers, gaming and social networking sites.

Court Orders White House to Preserve E-mail

A U.S. judge has ordered employees of President George Bush in the White House to search for and preserve e-mail messages on their workstations and other storage devices.

White House officials have acknowledged about 5 million missing e-mail messages from between March 2003 and October 2005, covered a period including the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the federal response to Hurricane Katrina. Two private groups, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) and the National Security Archive, both filed lawsuits in September 2007, seeking to have courts order the White House to preserve e-mail messages from that period.

The two groups have argued that the White House was required by laws including the Federal Records Act to preserve those e-mail messages as part of the official record that will be archived.

After months of legal wrangling, Judge Henry Kennedy of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia on Wednesday ordered White House staff to search their workstations and other storage devices for e-mail messages from that period. White House employees must surrender "any media in their possession - irrespective of the intent with which it was create - that may contain e-mails sent or received" between March 2003 and October 2005, Kennedy wrote in his two-page order.

CREW and the National Security Archive, an independent research institute and library at George Washington University, had sought an emergency order requiring the White House to preserve those e-mail records before Bush leaves office on Tuesday.

A White House representative wasn't immediately available for comment on Kennedy's order.

The White House has recovered millions of e-mail messages once thought lost, but the order was necessary to recover additional e-mail, National Security Archive officials said. Bush administration officials "did nothing to stop people working in the White House from disposing of memory sticks, CDs, DVDs and zip drives that may have been the sole copies of missing e-mails on them," Sheila Shadmand, counsel for the archive, said in a post on the archive's site. "We believe our ability to get a complete restoration of the White House record from 2003 to 2005 and evidence of what went wrong has been compromised."

The archive filed its emergency motion for an extended preservation

order last March. A magistrate judge issued two reports, on April 24 and July 29, recommending that Kennedy issue an order requiring search, surrender and preservation of the computer workstations and external media devices, such as CDs, DVDs, memory sticks, and external hard drives. Wednesday's report adopted those recommendations.

"If this kind of irresponsible conduct can take place despite the Executive Office of the President's obligations under the Federal Records Act and this lawsuit, then perhaps the country needs more oversight of record-keeping in the White House," archive director Tom Blanton said in Web posting.

Beware Web Ads in Disguise

"Buyer beware" may be a cliche, but any regular Web user knows you have to watch your back when clicking display ads on Websites. However, noted antispyware researcher Ben Edelman has had enough of the misleading ads and is taking action. In a blog post today, Edelman blasted Yahoo-owned Right Media for shady ad practices that are specifically designed to deceive you. He also plans to take things a step further by filing complaints against Right Media with the Better Business Bureau.

Edelman calls Right Media a 'remnant' advertising marketplace - basically a bargain basement ad network where companies can place their ads on Websites for a relatively cheap price. You've likely seen these types of ads before: mysterious windows that look like a system message from Windows XP or an ad that camouflages itself perfectly by blending in with the surrounding Website's design. Edelman contends these types of ads and many others are illegal and violate longstanding rules of conduct from the Federal Trade Commission as well as the Better Business Bureau.

That phony system message, for example, violates the FTC's requirement that ads cannot conceal their commercial nature, according to Edelman. Basically, you're not expecting a Windows system message window to be anything but a message from your operating system, so companies should not design ads to make you think you're performing a Windows function when you're actually clicking on an ad.

Edelman says 35 percent of Right Media's Remix Media ads use deceptive practices and the Yahoo-owned company is well aware of this fact. He contends that Right Media has a classification system that places ads in 160 different categories. Among the various types are a set of ads under the heading "deceptiveness," which includes ads with "false buttons" and ads that are "difficult to close or exit." You can find a complete list here.

The list is a little outdated, though. Following an October 2008 report that appeared on PCWorld and other IDG sites, Right Media overhauled its ad categories. The "deceptiveness" category was renamed as "Ambiguous or unclear attributes." However, even though the categories changed, the nature of the ads hasn't. Another worrisome point is that spyware programs that insert ads onto Websites without permission from the publisher often use Right Media ads. While it seems unlikely that Right Media is encouraging this practice, it does highlight a problem with Right Media's current set-up if it is the favorite ad platform among spyware makers.

Practices like this from a Yahoo company are troubling. Former Yahoo CEO Jerry Yang was quoted as saying that he wanted Yahoo to be the "best corporate citizen it can be." However, with an ad company that seems to actively practice deception that is a difficult ideal to live up to.

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